



The Locked Room

and
Other Horror
Stories

M. R. James

PENGUIN READERS

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Introduction

He jumped and screamed and, as he did, the face of (he thing came up towards him: no eyes, no nose, no mouth. He screamed again and rushed to the door. He felt the thing touch his back and start to tear at his shirt...

fixings ... things in the night, things in the house, screaming, running, staring ... In these stories there are things that are worse than your worst dreams.

Giant black spiders living in a tree. The terrible ghost that waits outside a window. Empty clothes that walk. The strange thin woman who moves through a man's picture. The boy with the long, dirty fingernails - and a hole in his chest. The woman who screams from the bottom of a lake. And the dry dusty old man who reads - but has no eyes!

Here are nine stories like no others you have read.

Montague Rhodes James was born in 1862 in a village in Kent, in the south of England, where his father was a vicar. From an early age, he loved old books and studied history, the Bible, languages and the books of past centuries at Cambridge University. He studied, lived and worked at the University from 1882 to 1918.

He began to write ghost and horror stories after reading the stories of Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu. From the early 1890s, he read one of his own stories to friends at Christmas every year. His great knowledge of history gave his stories an unusual amount of detail and his ghosts seem more real, and are more frightening, than those of almost any other writer.

M.R. James died in 1936.

Chapter 1 The Ash-Tree

Visitors to Castringham Hall in Suffolk will find it almost unchanged from the days when our story took place. They can still see the beautiful old house with its gardens and lake. However, the one thing missing is the ash-tree, which used to stand, proud and tall, in front of the house, its branches almost touching the walls.

This story begins in 1690 with a strange, lonely old woman. Mrs Mothersole, who was found guilty of being a witch. Sir Matthew Fell, the owner of Castringham Hall at that time, described how she used to climb into the ash-tree outside his bedroom every time there was a full moon. He said that she usually carried a strange knife to cut off parts of the tree and that she talked to herself. Once he followed her home, but she disappeared and when he knocked on the door of her house, she came downstairs in her night clothes looking sleepy. He and the villagers agreed that it was certain she did these things by magic and so she was hanged. Before she died, she fought and shouted, and her last strange words were: 'There will be guests at the Hall.'

After the hanging, Sir Matthew felt uncomfortable and guilty', and he told his friend the vicar about his worries. 'You did the right thing. Sir Matthew,' were the wise words of the vicar. 'I'm sure she was a dangerous woman.' Sir Matthew felt happier.

That evening, Sir Matthew and the vicar went for a walk in the gardens of Castringham Hall. It was the night of the full moon. As they were returning to the house, Sir Matthew pointed to the ash-tree in great surprise. 'What kind of animal is that running down the ash-tree? It looks very strange.'

The vicar only saw the moving animal for a moment, but he thought that it had more than four legs. He shook his head. 'I



'What kind of animal is that running down the ash-tree? It looks very strange.'

must be tired,' he thought to himself. 'After all, what animal has more than four legs?' He said nothing to Sir Matthew, but just wished him good night.

The next morning, Sir Matthew's servants were surprised not to find him downstairs at his usual time of six o'clock. When seven o'clock and then eight o'clock passed, they began to suspect that something was terribly wrong and they went up to his bedroom. The door was locked. After knocking several times and still getting no answer from inside, they broke down the door and entered, to find that their fears were right. Sir Matthew's body lay on the bed, dead and completely black. There were no wounds or other marks on him and everything in the room looked as usual, except that the window was wide open. His servants at first suspected poison but the doctor who was called found no such

thing and could offer no real explanation for Sir Matthew's death.

When he heard the news, the vicar rushed to Castringham Hall, and, while he was waiting to hear the doctor's opinion, he looked at Sir Matthew's Bible, which was lying on a table by the dead man's bedside. He opened the book and the first words he read were from the book of Luke, chapter 8: 'Cut it down' were the words he read.

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The servants locked Sir Matthew's room that day and it stayed locked up for the next forty years. By that time, Sir Richard Fell, Sir Matthew's grandson, was living at Castringham Hall. He enjoyed spending money, especially on rebuilding parts of the Hall. He also decided to make the local church bigger so that his family could have a fine new seat in the new part of the church. In order to complete this building work, some of the graves in the graveyard had to be moved. One of the graves was that of Mrs Mothersole, the old witch who began this story. The villagers were excited about the opening of her grave and a crowd came to watch. However, they and the workmen were amazed to find the grave completely empty: no body, no bones, no dust.

At about this time, Sir Richard started to sleep very badly. The wind made his fire smoke and the curtains move and, because his room faced east, the sun woke him up early in the morning. One morning he asked his servant to help him choose a better room and he made a tour of the house, finding something wrong with each room. Each one was either too cold or too noisy or it faced the wrong direction. Finally, he found himself outside his grandfather's old room. His servant tried to persuade him not to go in:

'It's a bad room, sir. They say terrible things happened in there, and no one has opened the door since the death of your grandfather. Also, the ash-tree is right outside the window and that's always unlucky, sir.'

But Sir Richard was not listening. He unlocked the door and walked straight in. 'See? Nothing unusual in here, James!' he said and he opened the window. As he did so, he noticed how tall and dark the ash-tree was. Its branches seemed to be trying to reach into the room. But he said nothing.

At that moment, a stranger rang the bell at the front door of the Hall. The servant brought him up to the bedroom, where Sir Richard was standing, looking around him at the old paintings and old hooks. 'I must apologize for interrupting you. Sir Richard,' said the stranger, 'but please allow me to introduce myself. My name is William Crome. My grandfather was the vicar here in your grandfather's time. I have some papers to deliver to you.'

'Delighted to meet you,' said Sir Richard. 'James, please bring us some wine in the library and then move my clothes and things into this room for me. I will sleep here in future.'

While he was drinking a glass of wine with William Crome in the library. Sir Richard looked at the papers, many of which belonged to his grandfather. Among them he found the notes made by the old vicar about the day of Sir Matthew's mysterious death.

'Well, well,' said Sir Richard, laughing quietly. 'How very interesting! It seems that my grandfather's Bible gave a piece of advice on the day he died and your grandfather thought it could be about that old ash-tree outside the bedroom window - "Cut it down" the Good Book told him. Those were the first words your grandfather saw when he opened the Bible on the day of my grandfather's death.'

'Do you still have that old Bible?' asked William Crome, 'I'd very much like to see it.'

Sir Richard found the old Bible easily. 'Yes, here it is. A bit dusty, I'm afraid. Let's see what it has to tell me. I'll open it at any page and read the first words I see, just as your grandfather did.'

He opened the book and his eyes fell on the words, 'You shall look for me in the morning, and I shall not be here.' Sir Richard

was sure that the words were again about the ash-tree - the Bible was trying to give him some advice! He ordered some of his servants to cut it down the next day.

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But Sir Richard did not live to see them cut the ash-tree down. That night, at exactly midnight, a strange and terrible animal jumped from Sir Richard's bed, ran silently to the window and disappeared into the shadowy branches of the enormous tree. No one was there to see it but the next morning they found Sir Richard's body, like his grandfather's, dead and completely black.

When William Crome heard the news of his new friend's death, the words from the Bible came back to him: 'You shall look for me in the morning and I shall not be here.' He immediately hurried to Castringham Hall, where he found the family and servants crowded round the ash-tree.

'Sir Richard's last orders were that we should cut down this tree,' explained James and then, in a quieter voice, he went on. 'and there's something very strange about that tree, sir. Very strange. It's hollow and they say something lives inside it.'

The gardener put his ladder against the tree and climbed up to look inside. As he held a light over the hole, his face suddenly looked so terrified that several of the people watching from below screamed and turned to run. The gardener himself fell off the ladder, dropping his lamp down into the hollow tree, which quickly caught fire. As the tree started to burn, the crowd saw an animal run from the tree. They screamed in horror as they saw its shape and size. It looked like an enormous spider, about the same size as a man's head and covered all over with grey hair.

'Look, there's another! And another!' someone shouted. For a long time the men watched these terrifying animals trying to escape from the fire one after another, and then they killed them with sticks.



*As the tree started to burn, the crowd f saw an animal run
from the tree. ¶*

At last, the fire burned itself out and William Crome, James the servant and some of the braver people went to look inside the blackened tree. There they found the bones of a human being. The doctors who examined it afterwards said that it was the body of a woman who died around 1690 ... the year that old Mrs Mothersole was hanged.

Chapter 2 A School Story

Two men, John and Edgar, were having dinner together one night when a conversation started on the subject of school-days. One of them, John, told the following strange story:

'When I went to the school in September of 1870, I immediately became friendly with a Scottish boy called McLeod. It was a large school and the teachers changed quite often. One term a new teacher named Sampson came to teach at the school. He taught us Latin. He was tall and pale with a black beard and he was popular with the boys because he used to tell us all about his travels to different countries. He always carried an old gold coin in his pocket, which he found on a trip to Turkey, and one day he let us look at this coin closely. On one side of it was the head of a king - I don't know which one - and on the other side of it were the letters G.W.S. (for Sampson's name) and the date 24 July 1865.

We enjoyed Sampson's classes because he often asked us to invent sentences of our own, instead of always doing the boring exercises in the grammar book. One day, he asked us for sentences using the word 'remember' in Latin. We all wrote our sentences in the usual way, and Sampson came round to correct each of us. My friend McLeod seemed to be having some difficulty in thinking of a sentence and when the bell went for break, I saw him write something very quickly, just before Sampson reached him. So McLeod's sentence was the last one that Sampson corrected that day; I waited outside the classroom for what seemed a long time before my friend at last came out. I guessed that he was in trouble for making a mistake. When he did come out, he was looking thoughtful.

'What happened? Was old Sampson angry?' I asked.

'No. My sentence was all right. I think. I wrote "Memento putei inter quattuor taxos",' said McLeod.

'Well, what does all that mean?' I asked.

'That's the funny thing,' he explained. 'I don't really know, you see. I couldn't think of anything to write until just before Sampson got to me. Then those words just came into my head from nowhere and - it was very strange - I could see a sort of picture of it in my head. I think it means "Remember the well among the four trees". When Sampson read it he went quiet for a long time, then he started to ask me questions about my family and where I came from. Then he let me go.'

We soon forgot about the lesson and McLeod's strange sentence because the next day McLeod became ill with a cold and he didn't come to school for a week. Nothing happened for about a month, until one day when we were, again, writing Latin sentences for Sampson. This time we had to write them on pieces of paper and give them to him for correction. He started looking through them, but when he got to one piece of paper he turned white and cried out, looking very frightened. He got up and hurried out of the classroom and we sat there for a long time, wondering what to do. Finally, I got up to have a look at the papers and the first thing I noticed was that the top one was in red ink. Our school never allowed us to use red ink; it was against the rules. The sentence on the paper said 'Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te', which means 'If you don't come to me, I will come to you'. All the boys looked at it and they all promised that the sentence was not theirs. To check, I counted the pieces of paper - there were seventeen of them ... but there were only sixteen boys in the class. Where this paper came from, no one could say. I put it in my pocket and it wasn't until that afternoon that I took it out again: it was completely white, with no sign of the red writing on it anywhere! I know it was the same piece of paper because I could still see my fingermarks on it. Anyway, Sampson eventually came back at the

end of that lesson and told us we could go. He looked at the papers one by one, and probably thought it was his imagination playing tricks. He looked pale and worried.

The next day; Sampson was in school again and he seemed quite normal, but it was that night that the third strange thing happened. It was about midnight when I suddenly woke up; somebody was shouting at me. It was McLeod, who shared my room; he looked terrified, 'Quick,' he said, 'I think a burglar is trying to get into Sampson's room.' I rushed to the window but could see nothing. Somehow, though, I felt that something was wrong out there and the two of us waited, watching closely.

'Tell me exactly what you saw or heard,' I whispered.

'I didn't hear anything but about five minutes before I woke you I just found myself standing here' at the window,' McLeod whispered back. 'There was a terrible-looking man standing just outside Sampson's window. He was very tall and very thin ... and ... he didn't really look like a living person at all. More like a ghost. He seemed to be making a sign to Sampson to go with him. That's all I saw before I woke you up.'

We waited a long time, watching, but we saw nothing more that night. Everything was quiet outside. We woke up feeling tired and strange in the morning. But during the day the news went round that no one could find Sampson anywhere, and he didn't come for our Latin class that day. In fact, we never heard of or saw Sampson again. Somehow, McLeod and I knew that we should keep quiet about what he had seen that night and we never told anyone.'

'It's a good story, John,' said Edgar, listening to his friend as he finished his wine, 'a very good one. But now I really must be on my way home. I hope I don't meet any strange, thin men *on the way*.' The two men laughed, shook hands and went their different ways.

It was about a year later that Edgar, the listener to John's story, travelled to Ireland to visit another friend who lived in an old



*'There was a terrible-looking man standing just outside
Sampson's window.'*

country house there. One evening his host was looking in a box full of various old things for a key that he wanted. Suddenly he pulled a small object out of the box and held it up. 'Have a look at this, Edgar. What do you think it is?' he asked.

It was an old gold coin with the head of a king on the front. Edgar looked closely. 'Where did you get it?' he asked quietly.

'Well, it's quite an interesting story,' began his friend. 'A year or two ago we were working on that area of the garden over there in the corner, can you see? Among the four trees? Right in the middle of the trees, we found an old well and at the bottom of it, you'll never guess what we found.'

'Yes. I will. Was it a body, by any chance?' asked Edgar.

His friend was surprised. 'Yes, it was. In fact, we found two bodies. One of them had its arms tightly around the other. They were probably there for thirty years or more. Anyway, we pulled them out and in the pocket of one of them we found this old coin ... from Turkey or somewhere, by the look of it. It's got something on the back of it, too. Can you see what it says?'

'Yes. I think I can,' said Edgar. 'It seems to be the letters G.W.S. and the date 24 July 1865.'

Chapter 3 The Curtains

(from The Diary of Mr Poynter)

Mr James Denton's greatest love in life was books, old ones most of all. His collection grew bigger and bigger every year, but he lived in his aunt's house, and she was not very happy about this.

Mr Denton was in London one day to buy furniture for the new house which he and his aunt were building, and he was on his way to a shop to choose the curtains. His way took him, quite by chance, past one of the best bookshops in London, and he could not stop himself going in, just for a quick look, as he to'd himself.

He was just walking round the shop, looking at all the different books, when he noticed a small collection of books on the part of England that he came from, Warwickshire. He spent the next half an hour looking through these and finally decided to buy one that really interested him, called *The Diary of Mr Poynter, 1710*. He paid for the book and then, looking at his watch, he realized that he had very little time before his train back to Warwickshire left, and he had to rush to the station. He just caught the train.

That night, his aunt questioned him about his trip to London and was very interested to hear about the furniture which was going to arrive soon. Her nephew described everything in detail. but still she was not satisfied. 'And what about the curtains, James?' she asked. 'Did you go to ...?' Suddenly James remembered. 'Oh dear, oh dear,' he said, 'dial's the one thing I missed. I am so sorry. You see, I was on my way there when, quite by chance. I passed Robins

'Not Robins the bookshop, I hope,' cried his aunt. 'Don't

tell me you've bought more horrible old books, James.'

'Well, only one,' he said, feeling a bit guilty, 'and it's a very interesting one, a diary of someone who used to live not far from here ...' But he could see that his aunt was not really listening.

'You can't go to London again before next Thursday,' she was saying, 'and really, James, until we decide on the curtains, there's nothing more we can do.'

Luckily, she decided to go to bed soon after that and James was left alone with his new book, which he read until the early hours of the morning. He found this diary, with its stories of everyday life at that time, very interesting. The next day was Sunday. After church, James and his aunt sat in the living-room together.

'Is this the old book that made you forget my curtains?' asked his aunt, picking it up. 'Well, it doesn't look very good ... *The Diary of Mr Poynter*. Huh!' But she opened the book and looked at a few pages. Suddenly, much to his surprise, she began to show some interest. 'Look at this, James,' she said. 'Isn't it lovely?' It was a small piece of paper, pinned to one of the pages of the diary. On it was a beautiful drawing, made up of curving lines, which somehow caught the eye. 'Well, why don't we get it copied for the curtains if you like it so much?' he suggested, hoping that she would forgive him for his bad memory of the day before in London. His aunt agreed and the very next day, James took the piece of paper to a company in the nearest town, who agreed to copy it and make it into curtains.

About a month later, James was called in to inspect the work and was extremely pleased with the result. 'Was it a difficult job?' he asked the manager.

'Not too difficult, sir. But, to tell you the truth, the artist who did the work was very unhappy about it - he said there was something bad in the drawing, sir.' James was thoughtful but still he chose the colours for the curtains and then returned home. A



James, though, did not want to go to bed immediately and sat in the chair by the fire in his room, reading.

few weeks later, the curtains were ready and a man came to hang them in several rooms of the new house, one of which was James's bedroom. That night he found that he could not stop looking at them and, although it was a still night, he was almost sure that the curtains were moving and that someone was watching him from behind them. He told himself that this was impossible and not to be so stupid. He explained to himself that the effect was caused by the curving lines on the curtains, which looked just like long, curling black hair.

The next day, a friend of James's came to stay and after dinner they sat up late, talking and laughing. At last they decided to go to bed and James showed his friend to the guest room, which was just along from his own. James, though, did not want to go to bed immediately and sat in the chair by the

fire in his room, reading. He fell asleep for a few minutes and, when he woke, he realized that something was in the room with him. Putting out his hand, he felt something covered in hair and thought it was his dog, who always followed him everywhere. 'How did you get in here? I thought I left you downstairs,' he said, looking down. To his horror, he found it was not his little dog, but something almost human. He jumped and screamed and, as he did, the face of the thing came up towards him: no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Only hair. He screamed again and rushed to the door, but was so frightened that he could not get it open. He felt the thing touch his back and start to tear at his shirt. At last the door flew open and he rushed to his friends room, terrified and breathing hard.

The next morning, early, James went away to the seaside for a few days to try to forget about his horrible experience. He took with him *The Diary of Mr Poymer*. He wanted to read it again carefully to find out anything he could about the pattern pinned on to the page. When he turned to that part of the book he found that there were several pieces of paper stuck one on top of the other. He carefully pulled off the first two and found this story, written by Mr Poymer in 1707.

'Old Mr Casbury of Acrington told me this day of young Sir Everard Charlett, at that time a student of University College. The young man drank too much and broke the law many times, but because he was from an important family, the university never did anything about it. He used to wear his hair very long and curling down his neck and he wore unusual, colourful clothes. His behaviour made his father very unhappy. One day, they found young Sir Everard dead in his room, with all his hair pulled out. No one could explain why or how he died, but the strangest thing was that, the day after he died, the body disappeared completely, leaving only a pile of long, curling black hair on the floor of his room. His father kept some of this hair

and had drawings made of it, part of which I have pinned to this page.'

This is the strange story behind the curtains. Before he returned home, James Denton ordered his servants to take them all down and burn them.

Chapter 4 The Flies

(from An Evening's Entertainment)

If you go to the end of the road, past Collin's house, on the left you will see a field with some old fruit trees in it. A little house used to be there where a man called Davis lived. He was a very quiet man who seemed to have enough money to live on. He didn't work on the farms, but he always went to town on market days. One day, a young man came back from market with him.

The young man was pale and thin, and he didn't speak very much. He lived with Mr Davis and nobody knew if he helped with the housework, or if Mr Davis was his teacher. But people talked and wondered why they were always walking together, early and late, up in the hills and down in the woods. They suspected that the two men were playing with magic and were plotting something terrible. Once a month, when the moon was full, they went up to a place on the hill where there are piles of old stones and rocks and they stayed up there all night. Someone once asked Mr Davis why he went to such a dark, lonely place in the middle of the night. Mr Davis smiled and replied, 'I love old places. They remind me of the past. And the air is beautiful on a summer's night. You can see all the countryside for miles around in the moonlight.'

But Mr Davis's young friend interrupted rudely: 'We don't want other people near us. We just want to talk to each other.'

Mr Davis seemed annoyed at his young friend's rudeness and he politely explained, 'People say that there are bodies under those old stones, the bodies of dead soldiers. I know farmers sometimes find old bones and pots when they are working in the fields around here. I'd like to know more about how those people lived and who their gods were. I think they probably practised magic'

Then, one morning In September, something terrible

happened. A farm worker had to go up to the top of the hill, to the woods, very early, when it was still dark. In the distance he saw a shape that looked like a man in the early morning fog. As he came nearer, he saw that it was a man. It was Mr Davis's friend-dead, hanging from a tree. Near his feet was a knife, covered in blood. The poor farm worker was terrified and ran back down the hill to the village. He woke up some of the villagers to tell them about the terrible sight and some men went back up the hill with a horse to bring down the body. They also immediately sent a young boy to Mr Davis's house, to see if he was at home, because, of course, they suspected that he was the murderer. When they cut down the young man's body from the tree, they were surprised to see the clothes he was wearing were all black, like the clothes that vicars used to wear many centuries ago.

When the men's horse came near the tree and the dead young man, it screamed and tried to run away, but the men were able to hold it and they finally got back to the village with the body across the terrified horse's back. In the village they found the young boy standing in the main street, with several women standing around him. He was as white as paper and would not say a word. When the men tried to move on towards Mr Davis's house, the horse again became very frightened. It stopped in the road and would not move. Then suddenly it turned and tried to run, and the body of the dead young man fell off its back on to the road. The horse could smell blood. They carried the young man's body to Mr Davis's house and when they opened the door, they saw what the poor young boy had seen.

There, on the long kitchen table, was the body of Mr Davis. Tied round his eyes was a black handkerchief and his hands were tied behind his back. His chest was cut open from top to bottom and his heart was gone. It was an awful sight. The men ran outside for some fresh air - the smell of death in that room was so terrible. Later, they put the young man's body next to Mr Davis's and they

looked carefully round the house. Why were these two men dead? How did they die? In one of the cupboards they found a small green bottle of strong medicine often used to put people to sleep.

'I think that young man gave Mr Davis some of this stuff to put him to sleep,' one man suggested, looking at the bottle, 'and then killed him. Goodness knows why. Perhaps he needed Davis's heart for his magic. Then later, perhaps, he was sorry about murdering his friend and went up the hill and killed himself.'

Well, the villagers decided that the two dead men could not lie in the graveyard near the church. 'They never came to church and they didn't believe in God,' they said. 'They believed in unnatural things, in magic.'

So twelve men covered the two bodies in black and took them to a place outside the village. There they dug a big hole, threw the bodies into it and covered them with stones. People say that



In the blood there were fat black flies, feeding.

horses don't like going near that place even today, and there is a strange kind of light there.

One day, some time later, some people walking along the road found a pool of blood across it. In the blood there were fat black flies, feeding. One man went to get some water and they washed the blood away, but the flies flew up into the air like a dark cloud, and flew towards Mr Davis's house. The villagers decided that no one should live in that house any more, so they set fire to it. The house burnt down completely, but for a long time people said that they often saw Mr Davis and the young man, standing at night when the moon was full, in the road near the burnt house on the hill.

Only the flies live there now. Perhaps it is only the flies who know why those two men played with magic and why they died the way they did.

Chapter 5 The Locked Room

(from Rats)

It happened in Suffolk, near the coast. There is a tall, red house there, built in about 1770, perhaps. It has a small, untidy garden behind it and from the front windows you can see the sea. Tall, dark trees stand around this lonely house. Near the front door there is a sign which shows that this was once a public house, where travellers could stop to eat and sleep.

One fine spring day, a young Cambridge University student called Thomson arrived at this house. He wanted to spend some time in a quiet and pleasant place where he could read and study. No one else was staying there at the time and Mr and Mrs Betts, who managed the house, welcomed him and made him feel very comfortable. They gave him a large room on the first floor with a good view from the window. He spent his days very calmly and quietly. Every morning he worked, he walked in the country in the afternoon, and he usually had a drink with some of the local people in the bar in the evening before going to bed. He was very happy to continue his life like this for as long as possible. He planned to stay for a whole month.

One afternoon, Thomson walked along a different road from the usual one and in the distance he saw a large white object. He walked towards it and discovered that it was a large square stone with a square hole in the middle. He examined the stone, then he looked at the view for a moment - the sea, the churches in the distance, the windows of one or two houses shining here and there in the sun - and he continued his walk.

That evening in the bar, he asked why the white stone was there. 'It's been there for a very long time, since before any of us were born, in fact,' said Mr Betts.

'People used to say that it brought bad luck ... that it was unlucky for fishing,' said another man.

'Why?' asked Thomson, but the people in the bar became silent and clearly didn't want to talk about the stone any more. Thomson was puzzled.

A few days later, he decided to stay at home to study in the afternoon. He didn't feel like going out for a walk, but at about three o'clock he needed a break. He decided to spend five minutes looking at the other rooms on his floor of the house - he was interested to know what they were like. He got up and went quietly out of his room, into the corridor. Nobody else was at home. 'They are all probably at market today,' he thought. The house was still and silent, except for the flies. The sun was shining and it was very hot. He went into the three rooms near his own bedroom; each one was pretty and clean. Then he tried the door of the south-west room, but found that it was locked. This made Thomson want to know why it was locked and what was inside it, and he took the keys of all the other doors on the floor to try to open it. He finally succeeded, the door opened, he went in and looked around him.

The room had two windows looking south and west, so it was very bright and hot. There were no carpets and no pictures, only a bed, alone in the corner. It was not a very interesting room, but suddenly ... Thomson turned and ran out of the room, closing the door behind him noisily.

'Someone was in there, in the bed!' he almost shouted. There were covers over the whole body on the bed, but it was not dead, because it moved. He was not dreaming, Thomson knew: this was the middle of a bright, sunny day, after all. He didn't know what to do.

First, of course, he had to lock the door again but, before he did this, he listened. Everything was silent inside the room. He put the key into the lock and turned it as quietly as he could, but

he still made some noise. Suddenly he stopped: someone was walking towards the door! He turned and ran along the corridor to his room, closed the door and locked it behind him as fast as he could. He waited and listened. 'Perhaps this person can walk through doors and walls?' he whispered to himself. Nothing happened.

"Now what?" he thought. His first idea was to leave the house as soon as he could, but if he changed his plans, Mr and Mrs Belts would know that something was wrong. Also, if they already knew about the person in the locked room but they still lived in the house, then there was surely nothing for him to be afraid of. Maybe it would be better to stay and say nothing. This was the easiest thing to do. Thomson stayed there for another week and, although he never went near the door again, he often stopped in the corridor and listened, but there was only silence. He didn't ask anyone in the village about the locked room because he was too afraid, but near the end of the week he started to think more and more about the person in the locked room and he eventually decided to find out more before he left. He made a plan - he would leave on the four o'clock train the next day and, while the horse waited outside with his bugs, he would go upstairs and take one last, quick look into the room.

This is what happened. He paid Mr Betts, put the bags on the horse, thanked Mrs lietts and said, 'I'll just take a last look upstairs to be sure that I have all my things.' He then ran up the stairs and opened the door to the room as quietly as possible. He almost laughed. 'It's not a real person at all. How silly of me! It's just a pile of old clothes,' he thought. He turned to go, but suddenly something moved behind him. He turned quickly and saw the pile of old clothes walking towards him, with a knife stuck into the front of its jacket and dried blood all down its shirt. He pulled open the door and rushed out of the room



He turned to go, but suddenly something moved behind him.

and down the stairs. Then he fell and everything went black.

When he opened his eyes, Mr Betts was standing over him with a strong drink in a glass. He looked annoyed. 'You shouldn't have done that, Mr Thomson, sir. It was a stupid thing to do after we've been so good to you. Why did you want to look in that room? Nobody will want to stay in this house any more if you tell people what you've seen,' he said.

'I'm sorry. I just wanted to know, that's all,' said Thomson. 'I won't tell anyone, I promise.' So, before he left, Mr and Mrs Beds told him what they knew.

'People say that a rich gentleman lived here a long time ago. One evening, he was out walking in the village, when a group of men attacked him. They wanted to steal his money. They held him down on that big, white stone which you saw when you were out walking the other day and they killed him with a knife. Then they threw his body into the sea. Later some people from the village moved the stone away from the village; they said the fish along this part of the coast would not come anywhere near it. The fishermen were not catching anything, you see. The people who lived in this house before us told us to lock that bedroom but to leave the bed in it, because the gentleman's ghost might want to come back and sleep in the house again. You're the first person to see him since we've been here. He's never been a problem to us. But please don't tell anyone,' they repeated. 'We don't want people talking about ghosts in this house.'

For many years, Thomson didn't say a word to anyone about what happened in the Betts's house in Suffolk, and I only know his story because, years later, when he came to stay with my family, I was the person who showed him to his bedroom. When we reached the bedroom door, he opened it very loudly and stopped outside. He stood there for a minute and carefully inspected every corner of the room before he went in. Then he

remembered that I was standing there and said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, but something very odd happened to me once.'

And he told me the story I have just told you.

Chapter 6 The Painting of—ngley Hall

(from The Mezzotint)

Mr S. Williams was a collector of paintings, and his special interest was pictures of old English country houses, English churches and country towns. One day, he received a price list from Mr Britnall's shop, where he often bought paintings. With the list was a note from Mr Britnall himself, saying that he thought painting number 978 might interest Mr Williams. Although the price seemed rather high, the description of number 978 made Mr Williams keen to see it. He decided to order it at once.

The painting arrived a few days later and Mr Williams tore off the paper, feeling quite excited. What he found was an ordinary picture of a large country house from the century before. The house had three rows of windows, there were tall trees on either side and a garden in front. The letters A.W.F. were in a corner of the painting, probably for the name of the artist. On the back of the picture was a piece of paper, torn in half, with the words '—ngley Hall, —sser' on it. He could not see anything very special about the picture and could not understand why Mr Britnall thought he would like it or why the price was so high. He decided to send it back to the shop the next day.

That evening, a good friend, John Garwood, came to Williams's house and noticed the painting. 'A new one, eh, Williams? Mmm ... I rather like it. The light is very good and I rather like this person at the front,' he said.

'A person?' said Williams, coming closer. 'Oh yes, so there is! I didn't notice it before.' Only the head of the person could be seen. It was impossible to say whether it was a man or a woman, but it was standing under the dark trees at one side of the picture, looking at the house. 'And I suppose the light is quite good,'

Williams went on. 'I still feel it's a bit expensive, though. I was going to send it back tomorrow.'

Soon afterwards, the two men went out to dinner with some of their friends from the university and later Williams invited some of them back to his house for a drink. One of them, who was also interested in art, noticed the new painting. 'Quite interesting,' he said, 'but don't you find it rather horrible, Williams? The light is good, but that person standing in front of the house is rather frightening.'

Williams was too busy pouring drinks to look at the painting just then, but later, on his way to bed, he looked at it again and was amazed to see that the person in the picture was now right in front of the house, not to one side under the trees. The person seemed to be on their hands and knees, moving towards the house. He or she looked extremely thin and was dressed all in black, except for a white cross on the back.

'Am I going mad?' Williams asked himself. He decided to lock the picture in a cupboard but did not want to go straight to bed. 'I'll write down everything that has happened to the picture since it arrived here. Then in the morning I won't think this is all a dream,' he thought to himself. And that is what he did. He found it very difficult to sleep that night, and the next morning he decided to ask another friend, Nisbet to come and look at the painting.

'I want you to tell me exactly what you see in the picture, in detail,' he said to Nisbet, showing him the painting. 'I'll explain why afterwards.'

'Well, I can see a country house - English, I think - by moonlight...' began Nisbet.

'Moonlight?' interrupted Williams. 'Are you sure? There was no moon there when I first got it.'

Nisbet looked at his friend strangely. 'Shall I continue? The house has one - two - three rows of windows...'



The person seemed to be on their hands and knees, moving towards the house.

'But what about people?' interrupted Williams again.

'No one at all,' said Nisbet. 'But what *is* all this about, Williams?'

'I'll explain in a moment,' answered Williams. 'Can you see anything more?'

'Well, let me see, the only other interesting detail is that one of the windows on the ground floor is open,' said Nisbet.

'My goodness!' Williams shouted. 'It's inside the house now.' He rushed across the room to see for himself. Sure enough, Nisbet's description was correct. Williams went to his desk and wrote quickly for a minute or two. Then he brought two pieces of paper over to Nisbet. The first was a description of the painting as it was at that moment, which Nisbet signed. The second was Williams's description of the painting on the

night before, which Nisbet read but did not believe.

'This is the strangest thing I've ever heard or seen,' said Nisbet. 'The first thing we must do is take a photograph of the painting before it changes again. Then we should try to find out where this place is in England. I feel there is something strange and terrible happening there.'

'Yes, and I also want to ask John Garwood to write a description of what he saw when he looked at the painting last night. We could only just see the person then, under the trees over on this side of the house,' said Williams, pointing at one side of the picture.

John Garwood came over immediately and, while he was writing his description, Nisbet photographed the painting. Then the three friends decided to go for a walk. 'Perhaps it will help us to think more clearly,' said Nisbet.

They returned to Williams's house at about five o'clock in the afternoon and were surprised to find Williams's servant, Robert, sitting and staring at the painting. When the three men entered, he jumped to his feet in embarrassment.

'I must apologize for sitting in your chair, sir,' he said to Williams. 'But I couldn't stop looking at this picture.'

'Please don't apologize, Robert. What do you think of the painting? I'm interested to hear your opinion,' said Williams.

'Well, sir. It's not the sort of painting I would let my young daughter look at. She's very easily frightened and I think this strange, thin person carrying a baby would give her bad dreams.'

The three men said nothing. They waited for Robert to go. As soon as the door closed, they rushed to the painting. Robert was right. The strange, bony person was now back in the picture, walking away from the house and, in its long, thin arms was a baby.

For two hours the three men sat and watched the picture, but it did not change again. They went to have dinner. After dinner



The strange, bony person was now back in the picture, walking away from the house and, in its long, thin arms was a baby.

they came back again and by now the person was gone and the house looked quiet and calm again in the moonlight.

They decided to read through books on Essex and Sussex to find —ngley Hall. It was hard work, but many hours later, in a *Guide to Essex*, Williams found the following information:

The village of Anningley has an interesting twelfth-century church and next to the church, in a beautiful park, stands Anningley Hall, which used to be the country home of the Francis family. No members of this family are now living; the last baby boy of the family disappeared mysteriously in the middle of a September night in 1802. Nobody could discover who took the baby but people suspected that it was a member of the Gawdy family. Some time before the baby disappeared, Tom Gawdy was caught stealing by Sir John Francis, the father of the child, and Gawdy was hanged for his

crime. People say that the Gawdy family wanted revenge and that they took it by stealing the last child of the Francis family.'

'Well, it does seem that they got their revenge, if the story of our painting is true, doesn't it?' said Williams.

The painting has not changed again since then. It now hangs in the museum at Anningley, in Essex.